

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel Hubbard Bell, November 10, 1904, with transcript

ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL TO MABEL (Hubbard) BELL Beinn Bhreagh, C. B.
November 10, 1904. Mrs. A. Graham Bell, Hotel Lorraine, New York, N. Y. Dear little wifie:

The continued discussion in "Science" of the Metrical System, and the desirability of its introduction into the United States, has revived in me the desire to participate in the discussion. I find it very difficult however, to write an article on the subject. My ideas flow easily but expression is difficult — and I consume too much time on matters of more verbiage.

I will therefore try the plan of scribbling my thoughts to you without stopping to correct the language. In this way I can get down in black and white some of the ideas involved for your edification and can take this letter as a basis for a communication to Science if it pans out properly. If not — you will have my thoughts in the rough — and at some future time I may take up the subject again; so here goes:

HOW TO INTRODUCE THE METRIC SYSTEM

A suggestion.

"If you want a thing done, do it yourself," is an old saying, and as applicable to the introduction of the Metric System as to other things.

Instead of simply urging upon others the use of the Metric System, why should not those who advocate the change, go 2 ahead and use the system themselves without waiting for further legislation on the subject.

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The Metric System, I understand, is already permissive in the United States. There is nothing therefore to prevent anyone from using it who chooses; and all that is necessary to give the System a fair chance in this country is that it should be brought into actual use by a portion of the people and thus be placed in competition with the prevailing system. Under such circumstances the better system will of course in time prevail and why should not America have the best.

Why not commence right now and order our coffee and sugar by the kilogram instead of the pound — our cloth by the meter instead of the yard — and our milk by the litre instead of the pint and quart! There is nothing in the state of the Law to prevent us from doing so.

The first order would come as a sort of a shock; and would probably have to be translated into English measures before producing tangible results. The American who first attempts to run counter to prevailing custom in this way would undoubtedly meet with the usual reception accorded to pioneers and would-be-reformers who act alone and without co-operation with others of like belief.

But suppose a hundred families in the same town should suddenly take to ordering their supplies by the Metrical System, the reception accorded them would be materially different — especially if those would-be-reformers were organized into a Society to promote the introduction of the Metrical System. Considerations of Expediency would come into play. How much would it cost to humor these customers, and prevent them from transferring their custom to other business firms who might be enterprising enough to supply themselves with metrical weights and measures. An ordinary balance would do for any system of weighing; so the sole necessary expense would be the cost of a set of weights, a metre stick divided into centimeters and millimeters, and a few measures of capacity- like the litre and subdivisions.

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The whole necessary outlay would amount to a few dollars — easily re-couped by increased charges for goods sold by metrical measures. Why not humor the whim of a good customer rather than run the risk of losing him.

Such considerations as these would probably lead to the purchase of metrical weights and measures by at least one business firm — but if one gives way — the others, in process of time must fall into line.

(Interrupted)

Beinn Bhreagh, November 12, 1904.

For — the members of a Society to promote the use of the metrical System — would be apt to transfer their custom to dealers who would accommodate them in the way desired — if the tradespeople with whom they usually deal turn out to be disobliging.

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(Interrupted again — must give it up I am afraid.)

Interrupted again

Your loving husband, Alec.